OPPRESSION TO EMPOWERMENT: SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN IN WARGA'S *OTHER WORDS FOR HOME*

Retno Yuliati
English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Languages and Arts
Universitas Negeri Jakarta
Pos-el korespondensi: retnoyuliati2607@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study offers an in-depth reading of Jasmine Warga's *Other Word for Home*. Deploying descriptive analytical method and P.H. Collins' concepts of Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition, this study aims to analyze the themes of women's oppression and women's empowerment in this book. Findings suggest that Jude and her mother, Syrian refugee women, are oppressed both in Syria and in the US due to their overlapping identity markers (gender, class, ethnicity, religion) in four domains of power (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, interpersonal). In Syria, they are oppressed in structural domain by Syrian government. Meanwhile in the US, they are oppressed in disciplinary domain to preserve her subordination. Both Jude and Mama are also oppressed by the negative hegemonic ideologies that evolving around Syrian refugees, Muslim, and Arab women. At last, they are oppressed in interpersonal level in everyday life. However, by nurturing certain behaviors in Self-Definition (self-valuation, self-reliance, personal empowerment), they help fostering their empowerment to resist the intersecting oppressions.

Keywords: women's empowerment, women's oppression, *Other Words for Home*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini menyajikan pembacaan komprehensif terhadap buku Other Words for Home karya Jasmine Warga. Menggunakan metode deskriptif-analitis dan konsep Matriks Dominasi dan Definisi-Diri P.H. Collins, penelitian ini bermaksud untuk menganalisis tema penindasan terhadap perempuan dan pemberdayaan perempuan dalam buku ini. Ditemukan bahwa Jude dan ibunya tertindas baik di Suriah dan Amerika Serikat karna beragam penanda identitas menyilang mereka (jenis kelamin, kelas, etnisitas, agama) dalam empat wilayah kekuasaan (struktural, disipliner, hegemonik, antar individu). Di Suriah, Jude dan ibunya tertindas dalam wilayah struktural oleh pemerintah Suriah. Sementara di Amerika, mereka tertindas dalam wilayah disipliner agar mereka tetap menjadi seorang bawahan. Jude dan ibunya juga tertindas oleh ideologi hegemonik negatif mengenai pengungsi Suriah, Muslim, dan perempuan Arab. Terakhir, mereka juga tertindas dalam wilayah antar individu dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Meski begitu, sikap-sikap dalam Definisi-Diri (penghargaan diri, kemandirian, pemberdayaan pribadi) mendukung pemberdayaan mereka dalam melawan penindasan menyilang.

Kata Kunci: *pemberdayaan perempuan, penindasan perempuan, Other Words for Home*

A.   INTRODUCTION

The distinction of men and women as binary opposition of gendered human beings has led to the forming of different treatment to each gender. However, women always receive not only different, but also inequal treatment due to the system of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a culture based on a gender hierarchy that allows people to see human capacities as 'masculine' or 'feminine', and eventually to privilege the masculine. In this way, the distribution of power inclines to elevate some men over other men, and all men over women. As an ideology, patriarchy also performs as a set of values that specify men and women in living their genders. Due to the power held by men, oppressions against women occur by the values enforced by the system of patriarchy (Gilligan and Snider, 2018:13-14).

Patriarchy is the source of women's oppression, as Sultana (2012:2) asserts that it is a social practices and structures where women are dominated and exploited by men. Furthermore, this male domination within patriarchy is ingrained both in public (e.g. employment) and private (e.g. discrimination against wives and girls) spheres (Sultana, 2012). However, Collins contends that oppressions against women are shaped not only by their gender, but also by their social class, age, religion, ethnicity and other markers as women's overlapping identities that women inherit as individuals (Collins, 2016). Thus, intersecting oppressions exist.

In discussing women's oppression, it is not unusual to associate women's oppression and Marxism. Women can be oppressed because of their social class. Women's oppressions in capitalist society emerge from social relations rather than biological difference (Ursel, 1977). Thus, social class decides to which degree a woman may feel oppressed, while still being controlled by men (Barrett, 1986). Meanwhile in America, with diverse beliefs and ethnicities, religion and ethnicity become another major marker of intersecting oppression in the United States. For instance, despite of being marginalized and oppressed group, Muslim women suffer twice, especially those who are originated from Middle Eastern/Arab. Not only they seem as oppressed due to their headscarves, they are labelled as weak and powerless women within family (Salari, 2002).

Due to these intersecting oppressions, empowering women are deemed crucial (Collins, 2000). Women's empowerment is individuals' or groups' processes in increasing their capacities in making choices and transform these choices into desired outcomes (Sharaunga, Mudhara, & Bogale, 2019). However, this empowerment can be advanced through self-definition, as it helps women reject the attached stereotypes and choose their own concepts and perceptions (Collins, 2000). Practically, by being aware of what they need and how their oppressions shaped, self-definition helps fostering women's empowerment.

Through this study, the writer intends to investigate how Syrian refugee women in *Other Words for Home* resist the intersecting oppressions within Collins' Matrix of Domination both in Syria and in the United States, and to see how implementing Collins' self-definition helps fostering the women's empowerment within themselves.

B.   LITERATURE REVIEW
1.   Matrix of Domination

In analysing the oppression of gender, class, race, and others that are all connected within American society in her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins builds on Crenshaw's intersectionality to develop her own theory of matrix of domination. Collins

(2000) refers Matrix of domination to how the intersecting oppression that are created by intersectionality organized, because oppression is impossible to be reduced into one fundamental type, as injustice is produced by the oppressions that are working together. This intersecting oppression, then, are organized into four domains of power. While oppression is organized in structural, disciplinary manages it. Hegemonic justifies the inequality that support the oppression, and interpersonal helps reshaping oppression in everyday life experiences (Limpangog, 2016).

a. Structural

Structural domain creates subordination through social hierarchy. Within a hierarchy, laws and policies operate. This domain also works in large-scale area (e.g. nation) and has been operating for a long period of time through the interconnected social institutions (Collins, 2000).

b. Disciplinary

Disciplinary domain preserves domination by relying on social hierarchy and surveillance. When a law changes, smaller institutions in which this law operates do not make as rapid change. Rather, it creates an opportunity for the institutions to control the subordination from the inside within continuous monitoring. It was purposed to create a quiet and docile subordinate (Collins, 2000).

c. Hegemonic

Hegemonic domain works with ideologies and culture. To maintain right to control, a 'commonsense' is produced. Therefore, the inequal ideology that legitimating oppression are enforced into social structure and are made hegemonic so that it is internalized within people. As a result, this ideology is considered as natural and inevitable (Collins, 2000).

d. Interpersonal

Interpersonal domain is where social injustice is completely accepted by individuals. Thus, it becomes individuals' decision to maintain or reject the reshaping of subordination within their everyday lives, especially among the oppressed. Furthermore, Collins (2000) contends that within intersecting oppression, each individual possesses his/her penalty and privilege, and this makes no pure oppressor and oppressed exists.

2. Self-Definition

Collins (2000) asserts that Self-Definition deals with the idea of women's journey from internalized oppression into liberated minds. Since women's oppression is basically originated by imposed values in the shape of stereotypes attached to them, women's capability to find their self-consciousness is very crucial, because being self-conscious by nurturing their self-esteem and self-worth help them resist the false controlled images about them, and a way of survival. Also, rather than referring 'self' as individuals, 'self' is discovered in the context of community, including family.

a. Self-Valuation

Self-Valuation refers to how women embraces their original characters and behaviours that are being ridiculed, particularly in media. Since many of the stereotypes applied to women are 'distorted renderings' of women's aspects that intimidate existing

power arrangements, it is a momentum for women to value these aspects to challenge the domination (Collins, 2000).

b.   Self-Reliance

Self-Reliance touches the issue of survival, as women need to rely on each other, particularly within mutual community as safe space to find support. Within community, women learn to speak their minds freely, heal one another from the oppression, and a space for women to resist their objectification as 'the other' within their unjust society (Collins, 2000).

c.   Personal Empowerment

Personal Empowerment occurs when a woman acknowledges and values her own weakness and learns to exceed her previous boundaries as a quick result of realizing where she lies. Furthermore, this self-knowledge happens within one's consciousness. Therefore, personal empowerment works as a woman's sphere of freedom in the inside, despite of her powerless state on the outside (Collins, 2000).

C.   METHOD

This study is analysed with descriptive analytical method as the writer attempts to describe the issue before applying the theories in order to find deeper understanding of the collected data. The writer also analyses women's oppression and women's empowerment that are showed in the narrations by deploying Patricia Hill Collins' feminist concepts of Matrix of Domination and Self-Definition. Meanwhile, the data are collected from a children free-verse book, *Other Words for Home* by Jasmine Warga, which was published in 2019 by HarperCollins Publishers Inc, New York.

In analysing the data, the writer reads this book thoroughly, determines women's oppression and women's empowerment as the issues, marks narrations indicating women's oppression within matrix of domination, as well as narrations indicating women's empowerment within self-definition. Meanwhile, the steps of data analysis are chronologically arranged in, 1) the writer classifies narrations that indicating women's oppression and women's empowerment, 2) the writer analyses narrations by employing Collins' feminist concept, a) matrix of domination (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, interpersonal) and b) self-definition (self-valuation, self-reliance, personal empowerment), 3) the writer interprets the results, and 4) the writer draws the conclusion.

D.   DISCUSSION
   1. Women's Oppression through Matrix of Domination
      a.   Oppression in Structural Domain

It was in Syria the beginning of the story took place. Jude discovered that many people were leaving their homes on their own. She also suspected Issa, her older brother, for plotting a revolution with his friends. However, Syrians have been known for living under Martial Law since 1963, in which Syrians receive various intimidation and torture at the hands of the *Mukhabarat* (Syrian intelligence agency). Furthermore, the bad situation was exaggerated by numerous social and economic issues plaguing the country (Smith, 2015). Thus, as a Syrian, Jude realized how powerful Syrian government was and the consequences of defying the President.

"Our president's family grew up
in the mountains to the north of us,
and if you listen carefully you can hear
the whispers rolling down the mountains,
telling us to stay quiet
and be grateful.
The president's ancestors are
powerful spirits." (*Other Words for Home*; 32)

The *powerful spirits* of the president's ancestors referred to Hafez Al-Assad and his son, Bashar Al-Assad, who ruled Syria ever since its independence declaration from France in 1963. Hafez's Martial Law was formerly declared as a meant to oppose Israel's military threat. However, it later became Hafez's legal legitimation for his repressive political system in taking control of Syrians. Due to the Martial Law, the use of military forces to repress those who opposed the regime was also allowed. On the other hand, both Hafez and Bashar had good reputation in military service, which encouraged Hafez to preserve his dominance by investing in military's allegiance (e.g. the *Mukhabarat*) for his reign in the first place (Lesch, 2013).

The use of Martial Law and military forces that worked as 'interconnected institutions' were organized to shape subordination among Syrians over time and in a large-scale domain. Hafez Al-Assad and Bashar Al-Assad as Syrian's presidents during their own periods enforced their oppression by creating a social hierarchy. In this pyramid hierarchy, Hafez Al-Assad and Bashar Al-Assad were placed on the apex as the sole rulers, while military forces and Syrians, including Jude's family, were placed on the second and third, respectively. In this way, a subordination was produced and so was oppression (Collins, 2000).

b. Oppression in Disciplinary Domain

When the situation in Syria became more hostile and uncontrollable, Jude and her mother were sent to Uncle Mazin's house in Cincinnati, United States to find protection, leaving behind the father and Issa. However, Sarah, Jude's cousin, seemed deeply troubled by Jude's thick accent and the fact that Jude was not as posh as her. Therefore, she created a hostile environment for Jude to show her dominance.

"Sarah and I don't have any of the same classes,
but during the second week of school,
I see her in the hallway.
I raise my hand to wave,
my face breaking into a smile,
but she turns away from me,
like I'm invisible.
She is leaning against a locker,
surrounded by her group of friends.
All her friends are pretty
with shiny hair
and clothes that look like they cost

a lot of *dough*.
They stand in a circle
that does not open for me." (*Other Words for Home*; 102)

When Sarah found out that she and Jude when to the same school, Sarah refused to acknowledge Jude's existence if they happened to stumble upon each other at school. Even though they lived together, Sarah never tried to show it. This situation was purposely created by Sarah to make Jude uncomfortable in her hostile environment, as Collins (2000; 281) contends that if it is impossible to keep out the subordinates out of the institutions, the dominant will take control of them from inside. Though Sarah's parents accepted Jude as part of the family, Sarah did not feel the same way about the idea. Thus, Sarah's motive as an oppressor is remained the same, to make Jude stayed 'quiet and docile' (Collins, 2000).

The fact that Sarah's friends had a lot of *dough* and spoke fluent English also created the notion that they possessed higher social class than Jude. It was not unusual since many Syrians prior to civil war had already lived in poverty with 30% high unemployment level and rife corruption (Lesch, 2013). Meanwhile, English inadequacy was one of many problems a Syrian refugee had when they came to English speaking country like the US (Yigit & Tatch, 2017). Furthermore, there is possible association between mastering English and one's social class, particularly in the context of immigrants (Pincus & Ehrlich, 1994). They argue that mastering English among this group is deemed important and highly supported by immigrant parents in order to keep up with the increased social and geographical mobility of modern life and to fulfil workplaces' demands.

c. Oppression in Hegemonic Domain

In the US, Jude learnt how people in local and international mass media perceived about people who fled their countries and looked for protection in Europe or United States. This showed the important role of western medias in covering the discourse about refugees and the public policies.

"I read about how Europe and
America
no longer want to allow people who come from my
country
to move to their shores for safety." (*Other Words for Home*; 149)
"The better our English gets,
the better we get at reading the newspaper articles,
the signs,
hearing the radio,
about how so many people don't want us here." (*Other Words for Home*; 151)

People tended to have bad perceptions regarding refugees because the portrayal of refugees in medias had always involved uncertainty, mainly in the term of benefits and costs and the possible threats imposed by these refugees to

the host countries, such as the ideas of refugees as infectious disease carriers and terrorists in disguise (Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013). Due to the negative coverage about refugee and its system in media, in 2016, many Americans rejected refugees, mainly Syrian refugees (Krogstad & Radfort 2017). However, the negative attitudes against Syrian refugees were also exaggerated by Islamophobia as most Syrians were Muslims, and the many terror attacks that happened in the west (Carlier, 2016).

> "But then, right as we are walking out
> of the hospital doors,
> a woman stops us.
> *Hey!* she says, pointing a finger at Mama's face.
> *Hey!* she repeats, the word like a stone thrown,
> *You don't have to wear that anymore.*"
> "Her finger moves from Mama's face to
> point to her head,
> to her hijab.
> *You're in America now. You're*
> *free.*" (*Other Words for Home*; 163)

In this quotation, the response of an American woman to Jude's mother's headscarf implied the shaped ideology that was distributed by mass media regarding women's *hijab* that symbolized women's oppression (Al Wazni, 2015). Despite of it being an old image as women's inferior status in Islam, *hijab* or women' s headscarf became the symbol of women's oppression in general as western people witnessed the forced covering for Taliban women in Afghanistan (Bullock, 2000). However, the negative attitudes against *hijab* are originated from western's perspective of beauty and sexuality that linked with assumed oppressive patriarchal value within Islam. Other than that, post-9/11 gave impact to how Muslim and/or Arab women were always associated to terrorism (Blakeman & Blakeman, 2014). Thus, western feminists felt the need to save these women. However, regardless of western's negative perceptions about *hijab*, *hijab* was considered as pride symbol and unique culture by Muslim women.

d. Oppression in Interpersonal Domain

In the United States, Jude befriended Miles, an American boy she went to school with. When a terrorism happened, Jude became the black sheep of the crime due to her Arab ethnicity and her headscarf that marked her as a Muslim. Though Miles witnessed the discrimination, he felt unable to do anything to help Jude.

> "Then I turn and there is Miles.
> He is panting and his face is flushed from the cold air.
> *I saw what happened.*
> *I didn't know what to do.*
> *I'm so sorry.*
> I hang my head.
> Somehow it feels worse that Miles saw." (*Other Words for Home*; 225)

Miles' passive reaction implied how he indirectly helped maintaining the reproduction of domination within one on one relationship. Though Miles himself knew how it felt to be oppressed at school given his deemed odd behaviour, he was as helpless when Jude was oppressed. In Jude's case, Miles was not discriminated for he was privileged by his Caucasian ethnicity and his religion that presumed as Christian, as opposed to Jude who was an Arab Muslim. Furthermore, street-level Islamophobic hate crimes were more likely to be experienced by Muslim women than men (Allen, 2020). Even though there was no pure oppressed or oppressor (Collins, 2000), Miles in this context could be understood as an oppressor for involuntarily approving the inequalities towards marginalized groups Muslim and Arab. While it was uncomplicated for him to recognize his own victimization, he could not do anything when other people were being oppressed. However, Miles' reaction was also considered as 'normal' as Islamophobia in the United States made the oppression against Muslims and/or Arabs became routinized and unnoticed.

2. Self-Definition to Foster Women's Empowerment
a. Self-Valuation

When Jude hit her first puberty, she started to wear the headscarves she brought with her from Syria. However, as opposed to Jude's mother and Layla's family who supported and celebrated Jude's transformation, Aunt Michelle showed her concern towards Jude's veiling.

> "No matter how many times I explain to her
> that of course it is my choice
> and this is something I have been waiting for," (*Other Words for Home*; 199)
> "only something to be happy about,
> something that back home,
> would've been greeted like Layla's mother greeted me,
> like a celebration,
> a blessing." (*Other Words for Home*; 200)

For Jude, wearing headscarf or *hijab* with proud meant embracing the values that embedded within Islam. Therefore, when Aunt Michelle was being sceptical about Jude's covering, Jude convinced her that it was her choice and that she was not forced at all. Meanwhile, the way Layla's family cherished Jude for wearing headscarf showed the important role of a safe space. Despite of being originated from different countries, Arab and Islam became Jude's and Layla' family's intersecting identities in America. Practically, by valuing *hijab* as their Muslim identities, they also helped each other in resisting their objectification as the other.

b. Self-Reliance

Living in the United States did not mean that Jude and her mother would be protected at all costs. Even though they succeeded to escape their country and government, they had to keep survive from the many racial and faith-related

oppressions in the United States. Within their vulnerable state, Jude and her mother had to depend on each other for encouragement and to find solace.

> "One day, she says to me,
> in English,
> *I miss home.*
> I hug her tight,
> so proud of her.
> *Me too,* I say.
> *Me too.*" (*Other Words for Home*;117)

Collins (2000:110) proposes that family is the primary place where a safe space works, especially within the relationship of mother and daughter. In this safe space, Jude and her mother relied on one another for their shared thoughts of fear and experiences of oppressions that both of them had no control over. Since Jude and her mother understood the feelings of being oppressed wherever they existed while being far from the father and Issa, this safe space helped strengthened their bond and as a way of survival.

c. Personal Empowerment

Regardless of Sarah's opinion regarding Jude's thick accent that induced her insecurities, Jude attempted to think of her weakness from the brighter side. In this quotation below, Jude tried to convince herself that her thick accent was also the same reason she was chosen for a role in the school musical.

> "Mostly, I feel sorry for myself
> because Sarah is right that I do
> have a thick accent
> and I wonder if everyone else in the cast
> thinks the same thing she does.
> My skin feels hot and too thin
> all at the same time.
> But then I remember it doesn't matter,
> I have a role!
> I'm in the play!
> And I have this magical thing called
> punch.
> Liters of it." (*Other Words for Home*; 208)

Collins (2000:118) asserts that a changed of consciousness can be developed within women who are forced to be powerless on the outside. This changed consciousness functioned as a sphere of freedom to maintain women's sanity within themselves. In this example, Jude embraced and respected her weakness and insecurities. By knowing of where she lied, Jude gained control of her own situation and the power to direct it into what she desired, to exceed her own limiting boundaries. The *liters of punch* thought Jude possessed, regardless of her insecurity, helped Jude in building a protection to keep her sanity on the surface, as Tate (in Collins, 2000:118) points out that changed of consciousness helps women

constructing a meaningful life in the middle of chaos, with no power other than intellectuality and emotions.

E.   CONCLUSION

Other Words for Home brought out a story which covered the themes of women's oppression and women's empowerment of Syrian refugee women. Through Matrix of Domination, the intersecting oppressions against Jude and her mother occurred in four domains (structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, interpersonal). In Syria, the citizens were oppressed by the interconnected military forces that intimidated them under Martial Law that was enacted by Hafez Al-Assad since 1963. Meanwhile in the United States, Jude and her mother had to cope with other forms of oppressions. Sarah always created a hostile environment for Jude to keep her in her subordination state. While bearing the oppression from her cousin, Jude also had to fight against the misconceptions of her identities of Muslim and Arab women, as well as her citizenship status as a refugee, that were disseminated by western mass media. Furthermore, Jude and her mother had to face the interpersonal oppression as well. However, Self-Definition (self-valuation, self-reliance, personal empowerment) helped these Syrian refugee women in fostering their empowerment to resist the intersecting oppressions.

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